

The dead Left: Trotskyism

The Platypus Historians Group

"One cannot separate the ability to know the world from the ability to change it, and our capacity to change the world is on a very small scale compared to the heroic days of the Communist International."

—James Robertson, founder of the Spartacist League (U.S.), "In Defense of Democratic Centralism" (1973)

see our task as the investigation of these failures, from the most obtuse ones to the most brilliant ones, for the purpose of critically considering the possibilities for Leftist politics today.

With this in mind, we have offered a set of starting points and critical positions that that have met with hostility and accusations from the walking-corps-Left. Our interest in rescuing the deep roots of Marxist thought in the high liberalism of thinkers like Kant and Hegel has made us mere "liberals" in the eyes of the undead. For them, we simply cannot truly be "radicals," since we don't reject "bourgeois ideology" tout court.

A more interesting accusation has taken place when zombie sectarians such as the ISO and the Spartacist League have called us "pro-imperialist" and "neo-conservatives" in response to our critique of the dishonesty, nihilism and stupidity of the American and European anti-war movements. These movements, we have argued, have tended to fall into support for the "war as bad business" anti-war argument of the Democratic Party—or worse, have tacitly supported the fascistic, right-wing forces that oppose the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan. The possibility of explaining both the nature of today's American imperialism and the (all too sane) demented politics of the Islamist opposition to the US in a single unitary critique of present social reality seems to be beyond the perspective of the dwindling anti-war movement and the sectarian "revolutionary" groups that cling to this movement for dear life.

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Lenin's coup was an irrational gamble. And a gamble it was—though not wholly irrational. In the vision of Lenin and Trotsky, the Soviet Union was meant to be merely a foothold into the crisis of the War, a foothold that would come into fruition only if proletarian revolts took power in other Western European nations. This was necessary because it was certain that as soon as the Bolsheviks established their regime, the imperialist governments that surrounded them would attack and easily destroy it. This attack in fact happened, when Germany, Britain and Japan left their support to the various right-wing military coups that were attempting to take down the Bolsheviks after 1918. And since revolutions across Europe that the Bolsheviks so desperately needed either did not take place or were violently put down—as in the case of Germany—the Bolsheviks saw themselves forced to fight tooth and nail to stay in power.

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This is the Left that informs Platypus's critique of the present.

Trotsky-ism in Regression

But doesn't this estimation of the history of the Left leave us only the option of becoming a Trotskyist organization like the ones whose mode of operation these days is to accost hapless protesters with shrill accusations of Menshevism before asking them to buy their newspaper for a dollar? If the tradition behind Trotskyism is in fact the richest one in emancipatory politics, why is the Trotskyism of the present so rotten?

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Second International Radicalism and Trotsky: "The last man standing"

The third label Platypus gets branded with is the most interesting one, and the one closest to the truth: that we are Trotskyists.

In fact, Platypus is in no way a Trotskyist organization, but we think that Leon Trotsky's thought and the heroic—and losing—struggle that he fought after his exile from the Soviet Union are necessary for an understanding of the thwarted potential for emancipation represented by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

Trotsky and his project in exile represented "the last man standing" of a kind of historical consciousness that we in Platypus have come to refer to as Second International radicalism. This was the consciousness of a political task in a specific moment in history that is best

represented by the names Lenin, Luxemburg, Korsch, Liebknecht, and Trotsky: all of them dissenting members of the conservative Second Socialist International. During the lead-up to the First World War, the Second International, having the largest membership it had ever had, recoiled from its avowed commitment to proletarian revolution: Each member party of the International supported their government's war effort. Second International radicalism, instead of seeing in the war an unfortunate event out of its control, saw it as precisely the crisis of the capitalist system that indicated an opportunity for proletarian revolution. It was a crisis in which the growth of the contradictory forces of capital gave birth to a series of imperialist conflicts that culminated in the largest war mankind had ever seen. With the international bourgeois order in disarray and a powerful workers movement, the Second International radicals thought that it was the moment for the insurrectionary struggle that would topple bourgeoisie's rule.

This understanding of the situation was what led Lenin's Bolsheviks to take power in October of 1917, after a workers' and soldiers' revolt, triggered by Russia's defeats in the war, succeeded in ousting the Tsar. This was also what led Rosa Luxemburg's revolutionary party, the Spartakusbund to attempt, and fail, to grab hold of the leadership of the proletarian revolution in Germany in 1918-19.

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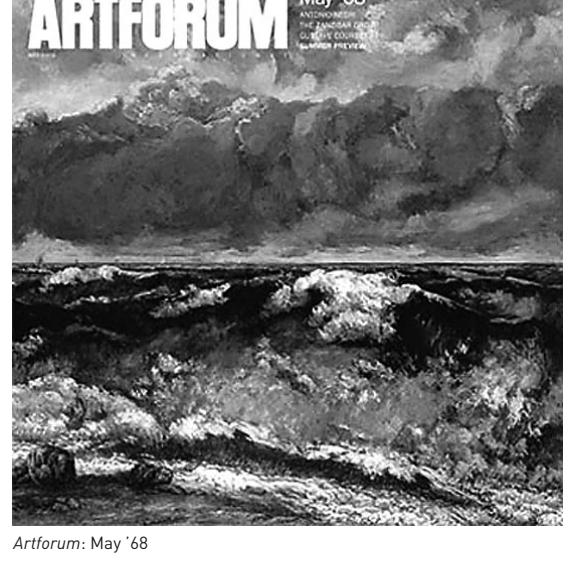
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basing their politics on the affirmation of this "rupture," the so-called radicals of '68 missed an opportunity to consciously shape their historical moment. Instead, their historical moment shaped them. They ended up accepting the ideological confusions and social degradation wrought by the breakdown of the welfare-state form of capitalism, and adjusted their politics accordingly.

This accounts for why the essayists cannot help but portray the narrative of the actual practices of 1968 as reckless posturing and festive abandonment, despite their claim to have historically advanced political theory. In his reflections on the student revolt at Columbia, Danto recalls an incident when he tried to negotiate the release of Harry S. Coleman, a dean of the school held captive in his office by students occupying the building. When Danto attempted to argue that it was wrong to hold Coleman hostage, he was howled out of the scene. Before leaving a group of students told him that he "didn't understand what was happening; that this was the revolution!"—an assertion repudiated within days, when the police cleared the building. Lotringer, also tells a story of the Parisian events countervailing to the achievements in theory. He writes that "They [the French students] stole France, took it for a joyride, and then just as suddenly, dropped it in a back alley with no more than a few scratches." In other words, the actual events of 1968, whether in New York or Paris, were characterized by a complete lack of goals and a delusional sense of strength. Nevertheless, Lotringer assures us that "May '68 left a lasting trace: From its ashes arose the most vital political theories to emerge in the West over the past half century, as the political creativity of the French May, thwarted in every other way, found in philosophy its most potent outlet."

May

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Obama

But this begs the question of the relation between theory and practice. The underlying premise informing all of Artforum's essayists is that 1968 represents an unprecedented and unique political event, which Negri argues, ruptures historical continuity. Thus, they affirm the same false sense of "progress" that lead students in '68 headlong into the streets to confront the human masks of unknown and unalterable forces; and who, upon being beaten back, nonetheless claimed victory for having elucidated the limits of the ability to change the world. To avoid this painful problem the *enragés* of May '68, and their disciples today, reinvent politics along the edges of the shattered pieces of their smashed practice. Upholding this fractured arrangement to be a theoretical breakthrough they lose contact with a fundamental aspect of Marxian critical theory—the ability to recognize continuity in change and change in continuity. It is this blindness that accounts for their inability to see in the *sui generis* political event of '68 the imprint of the ongoing destruction of theory (Stalinism and Cold-War Social Democracy), and it accounts for their blindness to the fact that in 1968's inept revolutionary practices laid the seeds for the future (today's) degradation of politics. Consequently the relation between consciousness and practice is obscured by contemporary theory, which has the effect of dissolving theory into aporia and accommodating practice to a deformed reality. Theory becomes affirmative of a reality it cannot consciously affect, and therefore cannot understand. Instead of considering this complicated and still growing problem, the authors opt for the introduction of abstruse categories to re-imagine the antecedent class-conscious theory; for example, "multitude" (Negri), "youth as a class" (Lotringer), "cognitive labor" (Raung), "difference" (Götzl), "heterotopia" (McDonough). These categories are not difficult to concretely grasp because the political philosophy situating them is so advanced; instead, their conceptual fuzziness and lack of political specificity result from the failure to discern the actual depth and contours of the problem.

Because American politics has been about the struggle for inclusion in the power structure by successive waves of various immigrant and other marginalized groups, it has been perhaps the most destructive illusion that the Democratic Party, which has played the inclusion game of its institutional politics better (especially in urban machine politics) than their Republican rivals, is somehow to the Left socially or politically. — As Gore Vidal once put it, American politics is really a one-party affair, the "party of property," with "two Right wings." The Democratic Party is simply the party that tends to include the interests of parvenu bourgeois elements from non-WASP groups, along with perhaps some of the more enlightened WASPs. "Black politics" has been part of this game, especially since the reorientation of American party politics as a result of the Civil Rights movement and the defection of the Southern "Dixiecrats" to the Republicans in the 1960s. Whereas previously the Democratic Party represented the unholy populist lash-up of Southern rednecks with North-

ern ethnic constituencies and organized labor, and the even earlier phenomenon of blacks voting for the Republican Party of Lincoln and Grant as a matter of course, today it is taken for granted that black Americans naturally find their political interests expressed in the Democratic Party. But this has worked to ill effect, especially as the "Left" has contributed to the charade.

The election of Barack Obama represents something very difficult for those on the ostensibly "Left" to understand, since that the 1960s Right (in both its Democratic and Republican Party forms) has been very successful in depoliticizing—effectively defusing—the issues of poverty and other forms of social degradation faced by most black Americans. The Left has played into this very well, doing their own work of replacing style for substance and, as Adolph Reed has put it, "posing" for politics. Thus, the "Left" since the 1960s has actually become a part of the new Right, a key factor in the depoliticization and hence conservatizing of American politics and society, for more than a generation now.

Of course Obama is just as much a product of this conservatism and depoliticization. This should shock no one. — Yet it does, and so this symptom is extremely important to note and understand.

The election of Barack Obama will be an event. It

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international, despite a growth of membership in the United States and France, was too weak to really take off, and after Trotsky's death suffered splintering and disorganization—a process of decay that slowly transformed Trotskyism into the petty and squabbling, cultish and hysterical, Trotskyism of today.

Trotsky was not only the single political figure that was able to maintain a revolutionary perspective of the Second International radicals in a time of reaction. He was also the last surviving exemplar of the revolutionary political consciousness produced by what was arguably the single moment in history up to date when the transition to socialism was a real possibility: 1917-1921. By the 1930s Lenin was dead, Luxemburg and Liebknecht had been brutally murdered, Karl Korsch had become fervently anti-soviet, and Georg Lukács, the most important theoretician of this moment, had weakened and adapted himself to Stalinism. Only Trotsky and his movement stood—in exile and with little power—without succumbing to either of the dominant perspectives on the Soviet Union of the time. The first one was support for Stalin's conservative, Thermidorian regime. The second, the kind of liberalism that is observance of the need of democracy and human rights, wished to see a restoration of bourgeois rule in the region.

Trotsky, the fight against Stalinism was the fight to make the Soviet Union a revolutionary force once again. The fight to preserve the Soviet Regime and avoid the restoration of bourgeois rule was necessary, since, as he predicted, such restoration would only bring about a right-wing dictatorship. Something that in fact belatedly came true in the form of Vladimir Putin's ominous hold over Russia today.

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Shelby Steele on Obama, but rather seeks to bypass such politics?

One catch phrase that has flown in the wake of the success of the Obama candidacy is "post-racial," raising the question of the degree to which America has overcome racism. But perhaps the matter is not one of our historical moment being post- "racial" but rather post-racist. Perhaps racism has changed. For the historical racism that plagued the U.S., from the failure of the post-Civil War Reconstruction era through Jim Crow until the overcoming of legal racial segregation with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-60s, is over. But this has not meant the meaningful improvement of conditions of life for the vast majority of black people in America, but rather has accompanied worsening conditions, as part of the broader greater stratification and brutalization of American society in the general downturn since the late 1960s—early '70s.

In the meantime, the political issues of racism, as they stood in 1950s-60s, have been rendered obsolete. On the one hand, American society and culture is less "racist" than it has ever been; on the other hand, real suffering is rendered, if not invisible then politically insoluble. There has been "progress" on the issue of "racism" while there has been regress in terms of addressing any problems of greater substance for black people. The hollowed-out politics of "anti-racism" meanwhile has come to serve, at best, the racket politics of black and other Democrats, and at worst a paranoid narcissistic trap for anyone who might be willing to think radically about political and social turning the page, even if the basic story remains the same. Change is its own value — if only because it represents an opportunity. — In this case it is the opportunity presented by the failure of "black politics."

The election of Barack Obama will not solve the problems faced by the greater lot of black Americans, but it might at least deliver the *coup de grâce* for a politics that was not working for social improvement anyway. And this should be welcomed — at least by anyone who is honestly concerned with the politics of substantial reform and emancipatory transformation of life in the U.S.

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The election of Barack Obama will be an event. It is a signal that we need not be held back any longer by the invisible illusions the prior "Left" bequeathed us — amidst the botched world they have made. We have been stilled too long under the weight of their obscurations and rationalizations, while society has gone to hell — or has gone, if you prefer, to "Nixonland" (the title of a recent book by Rick Perlstein): the "Left" has been complicit in the degradation of politics by mirroring the "culture wars" unleashed by the Right, becoming caught up in symbolic imagery, as in the late '60s Black Power turn, at the expense of real political progress.

This presents a paradox, and the Obama election is a very good emblem for it. For it is truly the case that Obama does not stand at the head of a groundswell of a social movement but rather only a successful marketing tweak of Democratic Party ebonification. The inability to critique Obama without recourse to de-authenticating his "blackness," which everyone feels to be a hollow move, exposes the utter contemptuousness of what stands for "politics" today. — In the end, the election will hinge on whether Obama as an image makes people feel better than John McCain does. This is an outrage, but not especially outrageous given the state of American politics today. But at least now political symbolism has developed so that the image of a "black man" can be one of jejuneness — if painful — shock to the bad "Left."

The surprising "black face" of conservatism Obama reveals ought to send reeling — and finally into the "dustbin of history" — the complex of assumptions involved in "black politics," so that we can interrogate what it was that was supposed to accomplish, for it clearly has not, and perhaps never could.

The Obama election will be an event — in that it will not be one. Nothing will change. But this might help the "Left" to change — certainly some for the worse, clinging to ever more demented and inflectional "black politics," but perhaps also some others for the better, who might finally extricate themselves from the trap such politics has presented for more than a generation. IP

to new people, and slowly integrate them into the process on the basis of their skills and interests. We need to bring people in through the discussions that politicized us. We need to meet students where they are at. Beyond working with students, it is absolutely essential to work with other organizations that build other social movements. We don't have the ability to organize workers, but we need coalitions with organized labor and its base. SDS needs to develop into a force for change on the national scene capable of keeping the Obama presidency accountable and responding when it fails. I think this campaign is a great beginning, because it provides the opportunity to build coalitions and fellowships with other groups with the long term goal in mind of gaining political power.

LR: I know perfectly well who those people were, Pam Nogales, Greg Gabrelles and Ben Shepard. I remember them coming back and telling us about the Left Forum conversation. Now, as you and I already know our proposal did not pass at the national convention, although we did have majority support. We are still working on getting full SDS support and trying to get it passed by the new national working committee. Why do you think this campaign should be a national SDS priority?

RH: If we have developed working relationships with other organizations that would be a success. Also, being able to figure out what could have improved so that we can do better next time. Knowing that SDS can't be something big, knowing that we don't have to lead it, but that we can be a part of shifting this country to the left, that would also be a success.

LR: I want to pull away from the campaign, and look at the big picture in the form of a comparison with SDS in the 60's and SDS now. What do you think are some of the most pressing unresolved problems that SDS faced in the 60's that we still face in the present?